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ABSTRACT

A study examined the nature and frequency of faults and errors in reference list entries and direct quotes selected from all 1988 issues of 16 social and biological science journals. All departures from the original (additions, omissions, or changes) were labelled as either a word or punctuation deviation. Of the 402 quotes verified, 33.33% deviated from the original, with several having more than one fault or error. Of 224 articles that had both quotes and the associated reference, nearly 60% had faults or errors in either the quote or the associated reference list entry/entries. Although a review of the individual journal percentages suggested that writers who published experimental research tended to have a lower percentage of faults or errors, the percentages still implied that writers do not exercise sufficient care in preparing and editing their manuscripts. Findings show both interesting and humorous examples of errors, and examples from quotes where the apparent intent of the original writer(s) was abridged, distorted, or misused by the quoter. Basic retraining and attention to basic research practices for people preparing for careers in scholarly research and writing is recommended to prevent this from becoming a compounding problem. (PRA)

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A Sixteen Journal Study of Accuracy of Direct Quotes and Associated Reference List Entries

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A Sixteen Journal Study of Accuracy of Direct Quotes and Associated Reference List Entries

The nature and frequencies of faults and errors in reference list entries have been recognized and verified in several studies of the medical literature (Boyce & Banning, 1979; Goodrich & Roland, 1977; Hartmann, 1984; Key & Roland, 1977; Poyer, 1979), and of social sciences literature (White, 1987a; 1987b). Although percentages of reference list entries with some fault or error tend to vary between studies, even the smallest of percentages is high enough, with most far higher (some approaching 50%), to support the generalization that fault/error rates are excessive.

These findings prompted White and Hernandez (1988) and Hernandez and White (1989) to study direct quotes, using procedures adapted from the studies of reference list entries. They found percentages of faults/errors similar to those for reference list entries. Of 1,189 quotes sampled from four psychology and counseling journals, 519 (43.7%) were found to have at least one deviation from the original (Hernandez & White, 1989, p. 510). In a companion study, in which quotes and the associated references from an education research journal were verified, 95 direct quotes were verified, of which 35.8 per cent were found to deviate from the original. The sample of 856 verified references produced 396 (46.26%) with some fault or error.

The difference in percentages of faulty quotes between these two studies suggested a second cross-validation study designed to

broaden the journal base from which quotes were sampled. The results of this study are reported here.

Procedures

All issues from the year 1988 of 16 journals from the social and biological sciences (psychology, economics, sociology, political science, social work, education, and counseling), were sampled for direct quotes. Quotes from sources in the home library of the authors, between one and six quotes per article, were compared with the original source. All departures from the original were noted as either a word or a punctuation deviation. For word deviations, note was made of words added, omitted, replaced or changed. A change was defined as a change of spelling from British to American (i.e. behaviour, behavior), from singular to plural or vice versa, etc. Each instance was counted as one deviation (not the total number of words added, or omitted). Punctuation deviations also were noted as additions, omissions, or changes (combined with replacements, as when a question mark was replaced with a period).

Reference list entries were compared with the original. Procedures were identical to those used in previous studies. Fields used were: Author(s) and editor(s), title of article or book chapter, and bibliographic elements — year, volume, issue if needed, page number(s), and, for books, the publisher name and location.

Specific journals are not listed here, because the journal is not

the medium of interest. The unit of interest is the author or group of authors.

Findings

From a group of 405 quotes located in 225 articles, 402 were verified against the original; three were not found, apparently because of an error in page number. In fact, 37 errors in page citation were detected, but a search of the article or pages of the book adjacent to the cited page resulted in 34 quotes being located. Of the 402 quotes verified, 134 (exactly 33.33%) had some deviation from the original. Several of the quotes had more than one fault or error, resulting in a total of 216 instances of deviations among the one-third of the quotes that were faulty. This percentage is similar to the percentage found in the first cross-validation study (White & Hernandez, 1988) cited above, and less than the percentage found in the primary study (Hernandez and White, 1989).

Of 224 articles that had both one or more quotes and the associated reference [one article had only one quote, but not found], 90 (40.2%) had no fault or error in either the quote(s) or the associated reference list entry/entries. Were this sample to be normative, then the likelihood of having a fault or error in a moderate sized sample of quotes and references appears to be about six out of ten.

A review of the individual journal percentages did tend to suggest that writers being published in journals which publish

experimental, empirical research tend to have a lower percentage of faults and errors. We grouped the journals into two sets, based on our view of the nature of the journal, and found that for 277 quotes from the more experimental research journals, the fault/error percentage was 28.2, and for 125 quotes from the other journals, more 'practitioner/professional' in nature, the rate was 44.8 per cent. This latter percentage is remarkably similar to the percentages we found in the four-journal initial study.

The percentages of reference list entries with some fault and/or error are also similar. That is, 28.8% of the "experimental" journal entries were faulty, whereas 41.9% of the other journal entries had at least one fault or error, this latter percentage being very close to those found for references from similar journals.

Even so, error rates ranging between the high twenties and mid forties suggests that, for both directly quoted selections and reference list entries, insufficient care is exercised by writers in the preparation and subsequent editing of their manuscripts.

Discussion

We have little to add to our previous expressions of some dismay at what we regard as high rates of fault and error commission. Our studies consistently suggest that far too little care is exercised by many writers, although obviously some writers are "better at it" than others. We surmise that apparently many writers pay far too little attention to precision in the original collection of their information and later in the production and

editing of their manuscripts. We could cite interesting, sometimes humorous, examples of errors, as well as examples from quotes where the apparent intent of the original writer(s) was abridged, distorted, or even misused by the quoter. But doing so doesn't provide a clue to correction of an apparently widely occurring situation. Apparently mentoring can not be relied upon. Some sort of direct invervention evidently will be required. We believe that basic retraining in writing activity is required, along with attention to basic research practices for people being prepared for careers in scholarly research and writing.

Where these interventions should occur, and by whom, is speculative. We recognize that the situation again outlined in the current study is "tender," but unless some effective strategy is devised to counter current practices, the fault/error rates we believe occur generally throughout most, if not all, of the scholarly literature will continue, and perhaps be a compounding problem.

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